The Asheville Downtown Association periodically surveys its members and the community to get feedback on issues and challenges facing downtown. We’ll utilize this feedback to formulate the questions included in this survey.

The top issues noted in the survey for maintaining the vibrancy of downtown are: supporting local businesses, safety, more parking/transportation options, maintenance of infrastructure, addressing homelessness and affordable/workforce housing.

Downtown Issues Questionnaire for Asheville City Council Candidates

YOUR NAME: Vijay Kapoor

QUESTION: Please tell us why you are running for City Council.

I grew up in Asheville and I’m concerned about the direction that the City is headed and its capabilities to deal with what might be coming our way from Raleigh, Washington, and the general economy. Over the last couple of months, many residents have told me that they’re troubled with how quickly Asheville is changing and that they don’t feel as if they have a voice in it. My goals are to ensure that the City focuses on resident and neighborhood needs – including downtown, that its policies permit only rational and responsible development, and that we diversify our local economy to improve wages. I want every resident to go to sleep each night feeling safe, fed, healthy and valued.

QUESTION: What do you feel are downtown’s most pressing challenges?

I own a small business and have my offices downtown in the Jackson Building so I’m downtown almost every day and I’ve asked downtown business owners about the challenges they are facing. They’ve told me that they feel that parking, transportation for employees and upward pressure on rents are their top concerns. As someone who walks around downtown frequently, I would also include improving sidewalks and pedestrian safety such as more and better crosswalks.

I’ve also spoken with a diverse group of residents who don’t live downtown, and what many have told me is troubling. They feel as if downtown is losing its “charm” and becoming a place for tourists, not residents. They said that they don’t come downtown anymore because it’s too crowded, they have difficulty parking, and it seems “geared toward tourists.”

QUESTION: What is the role of downtown in the greater Asheville community?
I work with cities across the country on budget and finance issues and in every case the downtowns serve as the economic and cultural centers of not only the respective city, but often the region as well. If the downtown is culturally vibrant and economically healthy, the city tends to be as well. I see a similar role for Asheville’s downtown. Having grown up here in the 1980s, I can remember when downtown was deserted after 6pm.

**QUESTION:** What smart growth strategies and funding mechanisms would you employ to support thoughtful growth in downtown that increases the city's tax base while also maintaining its character?

The City’s strongest tool to address growth is to have a strong set of zoning regulations that ensure that development in downtown is in line with its unique character. The City should not be shy about holding developers to a high standard whether that be downtown or anywhere else in the City.

**ISSUE:** Supporting local business

**QUESTION:** What strategies would you employ to ensure the sustainability of small locally owned businesses in downtown?

As a small business owner myself, I’m particularly interested in ensuring that small businesses thrive across the City. Asheville attracts people with an entrepreneurial spirit and the City needs to capitalize on that. The small business owners who I talk to are very concerned about the upward pressures on their rents as well as parking for their customers. While I don’t have many good answers for the rent issue, we can do better with parking and transportation (see my next answer).

**ISSUE:** Parking/Transportation

**QUESTION:** What improvements to our parking, transit system and alternative transportation options would you advocate for to ease pressure on the parking system?

I would like to see the business community, the City and the County partner with each other to set up a circulator that would bring people into downtown, but allow them to park outside of it. Additionally, I am hopeful that some of the businesses downtown can partner to create ride-sharing or buses that could bring their employees to and from work. Not only would this help with parking and congestion, but it would also help employees by reducing their commuting costs. One person, who works in the service industry, told me that the wages for his first hour at work go to parking, so he feels like he’s paying to work.

**ISSUE:** Safety

**QUESTION:** How would you work with the police department to ensure adequate resources to maintain public safety? What strategies would you employ to address the concerns regarding policing brought forth during the recent budget conversation?
We need to improve trust between the police department and all of Asheville’s communities. That can only be done over time by bringing police officers of all ranks (not just command staff) and community members together. I’ve spoken with community members and a police officer (who works in a city similar to Asheville) and the keys to improvement seem to be building trust and transparency.

With respect to resources, it’s critical to better understand what resources the police department thinks that it needs and why. During the recent budget process, in my view, the rationale for hiring additional officers wasn’t made available to the public until late in the process. I also believe that, given the turnover in the police department, we need to understand why police officers are leaving (compensation, etc.) and where they are going. If we don’t fix the turnover problem, we’ll be spending a great deal of money on training officers who just leave.

**ISSUE:** Infrastructure  
**QUESTION:** Identify your top three downtown infrastructure needs. How would you prioritize funding for these projects and how do you feel infrastructure impacts business success?

My top three downtown infrastructure needs are: 1) improved cross-walks, 2) better sidewalks and 3) addressing the parking situation. In my view, we need to improve the walkability of downtown and make it easier to get to and from it without a car and I would prioritize funding for projects that would do that.

**ISSUE:** Homelessness  
**QUESTION:** What steps would you take to support the Homeless Initiative Advisory Committee’s 5-year plan released earlier this year? What other strategies or initiatives would you consider to address homelessness in our community?

As federal and state funds to municipalities continue to dry up, local governments are going to be forced to find new ways of collaborating with each other (such as with a city and a county) as well as with the non-profit community. Based on reading the 5-year plan, the priorities and action steps appear to be well developed and I would work hard to see which could be implemented now and what it would take to implement the others.

**ISSUE:** Affordable/Workforce Housing  
**QUESTION:** What is your position on housing diversity in downtown? How would you direct staff to utilize funds from the recently passed Affordable Housing Bond? What other strategies would you like to see our city develop to address the affordability issue?

In my work, the strongest downtowns that I’ve encountered have a significant housing component with a diversity of housing types. I would like to see more housing in the downtown area. With respect to the Affordable Housing Bond, I have serious concerns about moving the city fleet garage on South Charlotte Street and would like to learn more about other possible uses. As to the affordability issue, we need to look at this from a regional perspective, not just Asheville specific. That would include improved transit so that people could get to places of work without cars. Additionally, I am a big believer in working to diversify our local economy to improve wages.
What is your 5-year vision for Downtown?

My 5-year vision for Downtown is to make sure that it’s a place where both residents and tourists feel welcome, where walkability is improved, where small local businesses thrive and where we can reduce the need for parking.

Any further comments you’d like to include concerning Downtown Asheville?

Please visit my website at www.kapoorforcouncil.org to learn more about me and my positions on issues.